

Let's not let the government shut off the Missouri River

By Steve Mahfood

Commentary

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The controversy that surrounds the management of the Missouri River is a complex debate over water rights and science and the impact that changes in the river may have on the average Missourian. Very simply, the debate is about how to best manage the Missouri River for the wide variety of users that depend upon it.

Missouri has the greatest population and the most diverse constituency of any state in which the Missouri River flows. Nearly 2 million Missourians get their drinking water from the Missouri River. Our interests in the river include its use for recreation, agriculture, power generation and fish and wildlife habitat. The Missouri River is also important because of its flow support to the Mississippi River.

During low-flow periods, the Missouri River contributes as much as two-thirds of the flow to the Mississippi River between St. Louis and Cairo, Ill. The use of the Mississippi River by a wide range of businesses, individuals and species simply cannot be compromised -- nor does it need to be.

The economic well-being of the Midwest depends upon this river resource. We sometimes take abundant water for granted. We may not think the Missouri River could ever resemble the Colorado River, where water rights battles were waged throughout the 20th century. Today, a mere trickle reaches the mouth of the Colorado River. But, because we share the Missouri River with more arid regions, the same considerations that were fought over in the West are now impacting us. A few upper basin states have asked the federal government to reduce the commitment to downstream flows in favor of higher water levels in artificial reservoirs to support recreation and sport fishing. This would put us all on the path to an ever-shrinking river.

The debate has often been characterized in terms of river transportation versus three threatened and endangered species that live in the river basin. This is grossly inaccurate. The proposals to hold more water behind dams on the upper Missouri River would actually benefit motorized recreation, a major source of MTBE to the Missouri River. The economic interests of North and South Dakota and Montana are the true beneficiaries of these plans, not the three species and certainly not the people of Missouri. If the Fish and Wildlife Service proposal would really enhance conditions for endangered species, we would consider it seriously. However, it appears to eliminate river uses while not helping the least tern, the piping plover or the pallid sturgeon.

We have been critical of the Fish and Wildlife Service because we haven't seen the scientific evidence supporting the proposed changes in the flow patterns on the river. Since the proposal's release, the Corps of Engineers has analyzed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan and concluded that it will not provide the desired benefits for the species of concern. The Sierra Club and the Audubon Society Chapters in South Dakota have already expressed opposition to raising

pool levels on the reservoirs, because bird populations nest along the reservoir shoreline when the pools are low. More habitat is available between and along the reservoirs with lower water levels. Our environmental groups here in Missouri are still studying the issue.

We have not been provided access to important information requested from the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Missouri River Basin Association had been making successful strides in working to improve the river by working with competing river interests and developing compromise positions. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, however, rejected public input and created distrust among the river stakeholder groups. We agree there is a need to restore habitat for endangered species, but we also believe multiple river uses can coexist and prosper.

Our position is pro-environment and pro-river and is based on a more holistic approach than that proposed by others. This debate centers on control of the water. We must all work together to protect this great natural resource.

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